



**Boosting rural economies through decent work and social justice in Namibia– lessons from other countries.**

by

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## I. Introduction<sup>2</sup>

- 1. The rural economy holds significant potential for creating decent and productive jobs and contributing to a human-centred future of work.** As recalled during the United Nations Food Systems Summit in 2021, with less than ten years left to 2030, many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will not be achieved unless we take action to make decent work a reality for all those working in agri-food systems and rural economies, thus ensuring that we leave no one behind.<sup>3</sup>
- 2. With almost half the world's population living in rural areas, rural economies play a major role in ensuring food security and creating decent jobs.** However, decent work deficits persist, with many rural workers living in poverty and working informally. While rural non-farm employment is gaining prominence in certain regions, agriculture is the mainstay of numerous rural economies, and a substantial share of the rural population rely on subsistence agriculture for their livelihoods. They are often deprived of adequate infrastructure and quality services, as rural investments have been lagging. Women, youth, migrant workers, and indigenous and tribal peoples are disproportionately affected.<sup>4</sup>
- 3. The global economic situation is dominated by the impact of multiple and interlinked crises.** Social justice is threatened in many countries. Within this global context, the implications for agri-food systems and rural economies have laid bare prevailing decent work deficits and exacerbated inequalities. Moreover, long-term trends in the world of work and agri-food systems, such as demographic shifts, climate change, urbanization and technological innovation, significantly impact the prospects of life and work in rural areas worldwide.<sup>5</sup>
- 4. Namibia's poverty and inequalities are largely driven by decent work deficits in rural areas.** While urbanization is advancing, around half of the population lives in rural areas.<sup>6</sup> The incidence of

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<sup>2</sup> This paper draws on evidence from ILO, 2022a, [Policy brief on Advancing social justice and decent work in rural economies](#).

<sup>3</sup> UN, 2021. [Secretary-General's Chair Summary and Statement of Action on the UN Food Systems Summit](#).

<sup>4</sup> ILO, 2022a, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> ILO, 2022a, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Hausmann, R., Santos, M.A., Barrios, D., Taniparti, N., Tudela Pye, J., Muci, J.F., and Lu, J., 2022. [A Growth Diagnostic in Namibia](#), CID Faculty Working Paper No. 405, Harvard University Centre for International Development—based on national population census data of 2011.

poverty is larger in rural areas.<sup>7</sup> The domestic economy is largely agrarian, with over 70 per cent of the population depending on the agriculture sector for their livelihood, and 23 per cent of the workforce is employed in agriculture.<sup>8</sup>

5. **Recent literature examining rural transformation across sub-Saharan Africa highlights the presence of unique challenges specific to the region when compared to structural transformation processes in other parts of the world.**<sup>9</sup> First, the region is very diverse, with its countries differing in population, resources, and income. The region is also changing rapidly amidst a context of complex and intertwined crises. In that regard, climate change is particularly daunting as it magnifies and deepens the uncertainty of rural livelihoods across much of sub-Saharan Africa. Second, within each country, it is important to gauge the agroecological and spatial heterogeneity that largely determine their rural areas' potential, including in terms of economic diversification. Third, the severe and multiple constraints and decent work deficits faced by many rural people need to be accounted for in formulating policies and investments through integrated frameworks.
  
6. **This paper will look into the potential of the rural transformation in Namibia for advancing decent work and social justice.** It will underscore the importance to boost rural economies through a rights-based and integrated approach prioritizing investments in rural areas towards skills development, entrepreneurship and infrastructure, improving working conditions and occupational safety and health as well as highlighting the importance of social dialogue in giving give employers and all workers a voice. Section 2 will provide an overview of major trends in the rural economy in the context of the future of work while considering the impact of multiple crises, with a focus on sub-Saharan Africa and Namibia.<sup>10</sup> Section 3 will follow with an assessment of priority areas at the policy level towards inclusive, sustainable and resilient rural economies, building on lessons learned at the country level. The final section will provide some concluding considerations for future action.

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<sup>7</sup> OPHI and UNDP, 2021. [Namibia Multidimensional Poverty Index \(MPI\) Report 2021](#).

<sup>8</sup> World Bank, 2022a. [Creating Markets in Namibia](#); Namibia National Statistics Agency, 2018. [Key Highlight 2018 Labour Force Indicators](#).

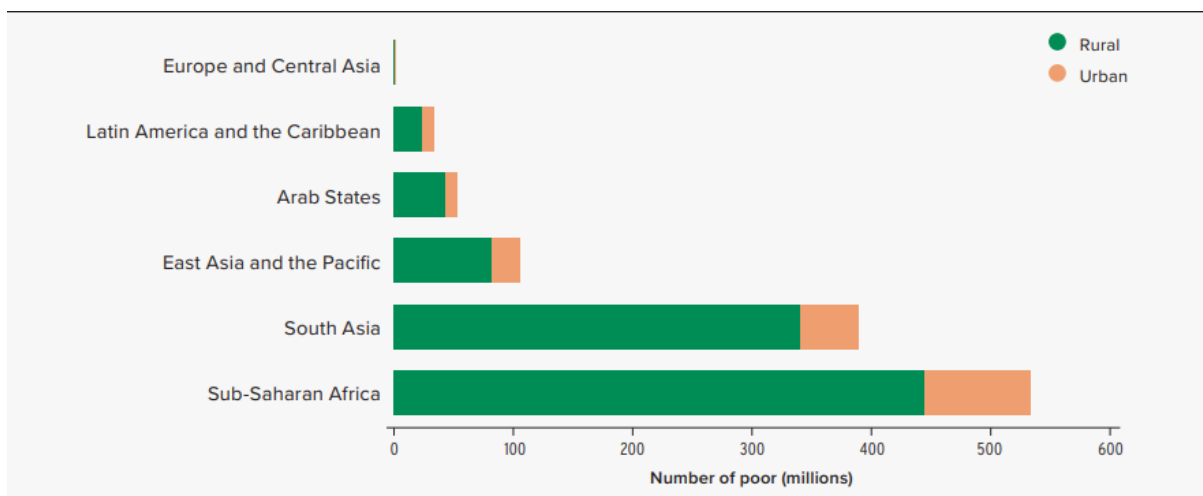
<sup>9</sup> Losch, B., 2016. [Structural transformation to boost youth labour demand in sub-Saharan Africa: the role of agriculture, rural areas and territorial development](#), EMPLOYMENT Working paper No. 204, Employment Policy Department, ILO.

<sup>10</sup> The paper builds mainly on data available from ILOSTAT, and other sources are referenced. Recent labour statistics disaggregated by rural areas are sparse (i.e., Namibia's last Labour Force Survey was in 2018).

## II. Trends in the rural economy: future of work and impact of multiple crises

7. **Poverty is predominantly a rural phenomenon.** Based on the 2023 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index, 1.1 billion people live in acute multidimensional poverty, of which about 534 million are in sub-Saharan Africa. Almost 84 per cent of all poor people live in rural areas, and rural poverty dominates every world region.<sup>11</sup> This implies that people living in rural areas are deprived in different dimensions, including health, education and standard of living. Already hindered by climate change, progress in poverty reduction also suffered a setback due to the COVID-19 pandemic and conflicts. Notably, two-thirds of the extremely poor are engaged in agriculture.<sup>12</sup> According to the Multiple Dimension Poverty Index (MPI) Report 2021, more than 43.3 per cent of Namibia's population live in multidimensional poverty, and people living in rural areas are poorer than those in urban areas (59.3 per cent and 25.3 per cent, respectively).<sup>13</sup> Hence, eradicating poverty by 2030 will require paying increased attention to rural poverty, including through targeted investment programmes.<sup>14</sup>

Figure 1 – World rural and urban poverty levels, Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2023



Source: OPHI and UNDP, 2023, [Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2023](#), p. 9.

8. **Food insecurity and growing inequalities are a cause of concern.** Hunger affects 281.6 million people in Africa, 11 million more than 2021 estimates. In Namibia, over 17 per cent of the population

<sup>11</sup> OPHI and UNDP, 2023. [Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2023: Unstacking global poverty: data for high impact action](#).

<sup>12</sup> ILO, 2016. [World Employment and Social Outlook 2016: Transforming Jobs to End Poverty](#).

<sup>13</sup> OPHI and UNDP, 2023, op. cit. (Estimates based on Namibian Household Income and Expenditure Survey (NHIES) 2015-16).

<sup>14</sup> UN, 2019. [Eradicating Rural Poverty to Implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development - Report of the Secretary-General](#), A/74/257 Seventy-fourth session.

is facing hunger.<sup>15</sup> Worldwide, food insecurity disproportionately affects women and people living in rural areas. Nutritious and affordable food is particularly needed to feed those engaged in the agricultural sector, who are often food insecure. Rural-urban inequalities can undermine development by leaving behind a significant share of the rural population. In addition to significant income gaps between urban and rural areas, rural populations face increasing inequalities in access to social protection and public services, including schools and healthcare, as well as unequal digital access.<sup>16</sup> Despite progress made, inequality remains one of Namibia's persistent socioeconomic challenges.<sup>17</sup> According to the World Bank, Namibia's Gini coefficient was 59.1 in 2015, second only to South Africa.<sup>18</sup> From a rural perspective, it is worth noting that geographical disparities in economic opportunities and access to services are widening across Namibia. There are also high levels of inequality in terms of land ownership, which has resulted in an agricultural system with large-scale, commercial farms and resource-poor, subsistence-oriented smallholdings.<sup>19</sup>

**9. Rural areas face decent work deficits alongside other important social and environmental challenges.** Over one in four workers work in agriculture worldwide primarily as own-account workers and contributing family workers (see boxes 1 and 2).<sup>20</sup> Rural populations are twice as likely to be in informal employment than those in urban areas, with the largest rates of informality in rural areas in Africa, and Asia and the Pacific. Looking at informality in the agriculture sector, 91.3 per cent of workers are in informal employment.<sup>21</sup> In many contexts, poor occupational safety and health practices and lack of social protection and labour protection are a cause of concern. In developing countries, a high incidence of child labour and forced labour also characterizes agriculture. 70 per cent of all children in child labour, 112 million boys and girls worldwide, are in agriculture.<sup>22</sup> Forced labour is also prevalent in remote rural areas and in agriculture and fishing, where 11 per cent of forced labour is estimated to occur.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> FAO, 2023. [The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023](#).

<sup>16</sup> UNDESA, 2020. [World Social Report 2020. Inequality in a Rapidly Changing World](#); ILO, 2021a. [Inequalities and the World of Work](#), ILC.109/IV(Rev.), para. 35.

<sup>17</sup> Namibia's National Planning Commission, 2021. [Namibia's Second Voluntary National Review Report on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals Towards Agenda 2030](#).

<sup>18</sup> World Bank, 2022b. [Inequality in Southern Africa: an Assessment of the Southern African Customs Union](#).

<sup>19</sup> World Bank, 2022b, op. cit., p. 4; GIZ, 2022. [GIZ Sector Brief Agriculture](#).

<sup>20</sup> ILO, 2020a. [Rural and Urban Labour Markets](#), ILO brief Spotlight on Work Statistics no. 11.

<sup>21</sup> ILO, 2023a. [Women and men in the informal economy: A statistical update](#).

<sup>22</sup> ILO and UNICEF, 2021. [Child Labour: Global Estimates 2020, Trends and the Road Forward](#).

<sup>23</sup> ILO and Walk Free Foundation, 2017. [Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage](#).

### **Box 1 – Low productivity, poverty and decent work deficits among smallholders in Namibia**

Smallholder farming or communal agriculture provides livelihoods for a large share of the population, especially among the rural poor. In Namibia, an FAO-ILO assessment in 2021 in the Kavango West, Kunene, and Omusati regions found that there could be potential for promoting horticultural production and sustainable agricultural practices. However, by and large, smallholders do not use such agricultural practices and cannot afford to invest in machinery and inputs. They also are missing access to markets and information. Another challenge was occupational safety and health, such as a lack of preventive and monitoring issues and no use of protective equipment to manipulate hazardous substances. Because of these challenges, agricultural productivity remains low, perpetuating low incomes and entrenching inequalities. Promoting productivity and addressing decent work deficits in smallholder farming can contribute to reducing poverty in rural areas.

### **Box 2 - Decent work challenges and opportunities in Namibia's fishing supply chain**

Namibia is one of the biggest fish exporters in Africa. Fisheries contribute around 15 per cent of all export earnings. The fisheries industry in the country includes industrialized marine capture fisheries, recreational fisheries, inland capture fisheries, mariculture and freshwater aquaculture. Community-based cooperatives and private small-scale fish farms dominate freshwater fisheries, while private export-oriented enterprises mainly run the more capital-intensive marine fisheries. According to the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources, in 2021, more than 18,000 people were directly employed on fishing vessels and land-based factories. Women represented 64 per cent of employment in land-based factories. Available data confirms that the sector is labour-intensive and has potential to create employment opportunities along the supply chain.

However, Namibia's fisheries industry faces several decent work challenges. These include occupational safety and health, a lack of skills development, especially for vessel skippers and engineers, and a need to harmonize national qualifications with international standards. Despite women's crucial role in fish processing factories, they often work in the most poorly paid and less protected jobs. They face gender-based discrimination, disproportionate involvement in unpaid work, and unequal access to education, healthcare, property, and financial and other services.<sup>24</sup>

## **III. Global trends shaping the rural labour landscape**

**10. A growing global population is one of the main drivers of the increased demand for food, mainly sourced from rural areas.** By the end of 2022, the world's population is projected to reach 8 billion people; by 2050, there could be 9.7 billion people. Moreover, many of the countries with the highest population growth projections are primarily rural, and their economies rely significantly on agriculture for employment and income generation. At the same time, the demographic profile of rural areas largely determines their labour supply dynamics.

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<sup>24</sup> For more details, see: ILO, 2020b. [Fisheries in Namibia for the European Market](#); ILO, 2022b. [Deep-dive research into decent work challenges and opportunities in Namibia's fishing supply chain](#).

- 11. The youth bulge offers a window of opportunity to accelerate rural development in countries with high population growth if new labour market entrants can find employment.** Nearly 1 billion youth live in developing countries, almost half in rural areas, which provides a demographic dividend and growth potential in domestic markets. This is particularly true for most countries in sub-Saharan Africa, such as Namibia. A large geographical scale, diverse ecosystems, a rich endowment in natural resources and fast-growing domestic markets complement Africa's demographic dividend. All of which puts forward sizeable opportunities in meeting the region's own needs and for global economic integration.<sup>25</sup>
- 12. However, despite improved levels of education and training,** young men and women in rural areas continue to suffer disproportionately from insufficient decent job opportunities and tend to seek (self-)employment in the informal economy. There are growing concerns about youth unemployment, especially the increase of youth not in education, employment, or training (NEET), including in rural areas. In 2019, ILO estimated that the share of rural youth NEET was 24.4 per cent compared to 20.2 per cent in urban areas. According to the Namibia LFS 2018, the youth NEET was as high as 34.8 per cent in rural areas, which was in line with the national average.<sup>26</sup>
- 13. Women are the backbone of many agri-food systems and rural economies.** Rural women comprise almost half of the world's agricultural labour force, working as farmers, wage earners and entrepreneurs. However, rural women are often concentrated in low-skilled, low-productivity, informal jobs characterized by low pay, poor working conditions, and limited access to social protection. They also shoulder a disproportionate burden of unpaid care and household work, including food provision and caring for children, the sick and the elderly. In poor households in developing countries, rural women's unpaid work often includes collecting wood and water. Restrictive social norms and gender stereotypes can limit women farmers' access to productive resources such as land or even key services such as financial services and agricultural extension services. Rural women also face barriers in accessing education, training opportunities, and employment services or business advisory support. There are wide gender gaps in terms of voice and representation to consider.
- 14. As urbanization advances, rural areas can tap into the potential of growing urban demand through rural-urban linkages and small towns.** It is worth noting that some of the fastest-growing urban agglomerations are cities with less than 1 million inhabitants, many of them in Africa and Asia.

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<sup>25</sup> Losch, 2016, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Namibia National Statistics Agency, 2018, op. cit.

This pattern underlines the potential of small and secondary towns in rural areas for inclusive structural transformation and faster poverty reduction. By fostering rural-urban linkages and diversified employment opportunities, more people may live in rural areas while working in small urban centres.

- 15. Rural economies are increasingly integrated into national and international markets.** The production of goods and services is increasingly dispersed across and within countries through modern logistics and digital technologies. Rural economies that are more outward-looking and capable of mobilizing their comparative advantage could benefit from this. At the same time, spatial polarization could increase in regions with lower productivity and limited opportunities for agribusiness and rural non-farm economic investment. Because of that, investments to foster productivity, export promotion and skills development can contribute to boosting rural competitiveness and a more equal spatial distribution of economic activities.<sup>27</sup> Some underlying obstacles faced by small-scale producers and rural workers include issues accessing markets, information, skills development, among others, which impede them from fully prospering in supply chains.
- 16. The transformational potential of a just transition in rural economies has yet to be boosted.** Many rural communities are directly exposed to the impacts of climate change because their livelihoods largely depend on natural resources. They can be affected by structural shifts in manufacturing and natural resource-based industries. Rural areas are often hotspots for climate change hazards and natural disasters, increasing in number and intensity. Decent work deficits in the rural economy can contribute to further environmental degradation. For example, poor rural households lacking access to social protection may resort to unsustainable natural resource extraction for subsistence.
- 17. Changing weather patterns threaten agricultural incomes and rural jobs.** For instance, rain-fed agriculture will be significantly affected, and it currently provides around 60 per cent of the world's agricultural production and covers 96 per cent of cultivated land in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>28</sup> Without adaptation measures, farmers practising rain-fed agriculture in vulnerable regions could be displaced or have little choice but to migrate. Moreover, global food production is bound to expand in response

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<sup>27</sup> Greenville, J., Kawasaki, K. and Jouanjean, M.A., 2019. [Value Adding Pathways in Agriculture and Food Trade: The Role of GVCS and Services](#), OECD Food, Agriculture and Fisheries Papers No. 123, OECD.

<sup>28</sup> ILO, 2018. [World Employment Social Outlook 2018: Greening with Jobs](#).



to increasing global demand. Unless action is taken towards more sustainable and resilient agri-food systems, the world's capacity to meet its longer-term food needs could be undermined.

- 18. Green jobs can also be created in other sectors of the rural economy, such as in renewable energy and the circular economy.** Almost 6 million jobs can be created by moving away from an extract-manufacture-use-discard model and embracing the recycling, reuse, re-manufacture, rental and more extended durability of goods.<sup>29</sup> With rising energy prices, there can be greater opportunities for rural areas as producers of renewable energy.<sup>30</sup>
- 19. Technology deployment in the world of work is rapidly intensifying with major changes in production processes and work practices worldwide.** The digitalization of the rural economy can deliver economic, social and environmental benefits if promoted in an inclusive manner. Technologies such as aerial satellite imagery, greenness sensors, soil maps and weather data points can boost productivity and promote more sustainable production practices. Moreover, these innovations can improve OSH outcomes in rural areas. Advances in communications technologies and digital literacy can create job opportunities in the rural non-farm economy, especially for the younger generations. Such technological advances can also improve access to financial services and opportunities for skills development and job search engines. However, given existing inequalities in access to technology, digital innovations need to be accessible and affordable, with due consideration to rural women. As digitalization will make rural labour markets more skills-intensive, investments are needed to support rural workers in labour market transitions over the course of their lives and as the process of structural transformation advances and new job opportunities emerge in diverse occupations and sectors.<sup>31</sup>
- 20. Longstanding challenges such as climate change, demographic realities, and unequal technological progress are now compounded by multiple crises, which has shed light on the heightened vulnerability of rural areas.** Informality in rural areas further undermines their resilience to future shocks.<sup>32</sup> Thus, for many SSA, much of the growth and employment opportunities ahead

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<sup>29</sup> ILO, 2018, op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> Raderschall, L. and Sanabria, A., 2022. [Rural Areas to the Rescue: How Rural Renewables are Driving the Green Transition](#), OECD Cogito Blog, accessed on 28 August 2023.

<sup>31</sup> ILO, 2022c, [Responding to the Crisis and Fostering Inclusive and Sustainable Development with a New Generation of Comprehensive Employment Policies](#), ILC.110/V; IFPRI, 2019. [Global Food Policy Report 2019](#).

<sup>32</sup> ILO, 2021a, op. cit., para. 62.

depend on their ability to advance an inclusive, sustainable and resilient process of structural transformation.<sup>33</sup>

#### IV. Policies towards inclusive, sustainable and resilient rural economies

- 21. Promoting inclusive, sustainable and resilient rural economies emerges as a priority, especially in the context of prolonged and recurrent crises.** There is also an opportunity to harness the potential of rural economies for decent work, poverty reduction and food security while ensuring that no one is left behind. This is particularly true for countries in sub-Saharan Africa, such as Namibia, where two-thirds of the population live and work in rural areas, and agriculture represents a sizeable share of employment. A key lesson from ILO's longstanding work in promoting decent work in rural economies is the recognition of the untapped potential within rural communities. With the appropriate policies and investments, rural populations can be empowered to unleash this potential.
- 22. Since the challenges in rural areas need to be tackled simultaneously, evidence shows that a coherent, comprehensive and integrated approach can be most effective.**<sup>34</sup> Through this approach, policy responses can support job creation and address inequalities as well as transformational shifts in a context of evolving social, economic, environmental and technological realities.
- 23. All such policy efforts are to be anchored in international labour standards (ILS) and be supported through social dialogue. ILS are critical to ensure a rights-based approach to rural transformation.** This includes ensuring the respect of fundamental principles and rights at work, as well as the promotion of the ratification and application of international labour standards relevant to the promotion of decent work in the rural economy.<sup>35</sup> Through social dialogue, countries will determine the adequate policy mix and find solutions towards a human-centred recovery.

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<sup>33</sup> Losch, 2016, op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> ILO, 2008. [Resolutions Adopted by the International Labour Conference at its 97th Session](#), International Labour Conference; ILO, 2023b. [Global Employment Policy Review 2023: Macroeconomic policies for recovery and structural transformation](#).

<sup>35</sup> ILO, 2019. [Portfolio of Policy Guidance Notes on the Promotion of Decent Work in the Rural Economy: Annex 1: Instruments](#).

- 24. The promotion of decent work in the rural economy touches upon a wide range of economic policies that affect both the supply and demand sides of the rural labour market, as well as the intermediation between them.** This calls for comprehensive employment policy frameworks that encompass labour market policies as well as sectoral and investment policies affecting rural economies.<sup>36</sup> From a sectoral policy perspective, this would require measures that put decent work at their heart. When pursuing pro-employment budgeting, it will be essential to account for sectoral and rural development policies in view of their direct impact in terms of job creation, but also in their impacts on improving working conditions, as well as reducing poverty and spatial/rural-urban inequalities.<sup>37</sup>
- 25. Policy coherence and coordination are of paramount importance. It often involves a whole-of-government approach, strengthening linkages and collaboration among state agencies across sectors and governance levels.** Social dialogue has a crucial role in designing policies to promote social justice in rural areas. As much of the policy responses will be multi-sectoral, there are opportunities for capitalizing synergies among rural economy sectors and ensuring that interventions are mutually reinforcing.<sup>38</sup>

### **Box 3 – Addressing labour statistics and decent work data gaps in rural areas**

Rural labour statistics and decent work data on the rural economy contribute to a better understanding of changing dynamics in rural economies. Overall, labour statistics are essential for identifying and monitoring labour market issues and deficiencies, informing policy formulation, and enabling policy evaluation. In terms of scope, they cover both labour supply and labour demand, the micro and the macro levels, and all economic actors (individuals, enterprises, and the public sector), thus providing a comprehensive picture of the situation of the labour market as well as information on its socioeconomic context. In particular, the challenges to sustainable development and decent work are very different in rural and urban areas. For instance, in many countries, agriculture is the backbone of the rural economy, but official statistics may exclude agricultural activities from the informal sector, such as subsistence agriculture, thereby underestimating the overall contribution of this sector to the economy. This exclusion also limits the possibilities for analysing, assessing, and understanding the structure of informality within the country. Therefore, information on the main labour market indicators disaggregated by rural and urban areas, and by occupations and economic sectors, is critical for

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<sup>36</sup> Yadong, W., 2021. [From policy to results: Guidelines for the implementation of national employment policies](#), ILO, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> Yadong, W., 2021, op. cit.

<sup>38</sup> UN [Our Common Agenda](#).

assessing the labour market composition and configuration by rural-urban area and to inform targeted labour market research and policy formulation.<sup>39</sup>

**26. Investments in strategic sectors are crucial to boost the potential for inclusive decent job creation in rural economies.**

Such investments will have impacts in terms of direct, indirect and induced employment creation. It will also make rural areas more resilient and attractive to live and work. Investing in the productive transformation of agriculture would go hand in hand with investments in the agri-food systems, and the economic diversification to rural non-farm activities, such as commerce, construction, mining, forestry or tourism, among others. Moreover, rural economies increasingly call for investments to build and maintain the infrastructure to improve access to quality services, especially essential services (see box 4).

**27. Investing in rural mobility and connectivity, including electrification and telecommunications, is a strategic priority for an inclusive recovery process, as they contribute to employment and economic development.**

Ensuring rural digital connectivity is essential to correct the historical isolation of rural areas and reduce their dependence on physical infrastructure to access information and services. Improved digital connectivity also enables rural people to study and work remotely. It also facilitates e-commercialisation from and to rural areas. In that regard, rural-urban partnerships become increasingly relevant for promoting rural revitalization and job creation.<sup>40</sup>

**Box 4 - Enhancing access to rural areas through investments in infrastructure**

In Timor-Leste, 70 per cent of the population live and work in rural areas. The agro-forestry sector has significant economic potential but remains curtailed due to limited access to rural roads. With support from the EU and in collaboration with GIZ, the ILO provides market linkages to agro-forestry communities through improved rural road access built by contractors trained to use local resource-based approaches, thereby creating decent work employment and income support for the communities. Fifteen rural roads have been prioritized and rehabilitated, and capacity building has been provided to local contractors. Thanks to such improved road accessibility, there is a renewed life for these rural communities through direct employment creation in infrastructure development, including for rural women, and increased market access for local farmers. There are also efforts towards implementing green and resilient engineering approaches, such as bioengineering, to protect areas with high risk of erosion and landslide.

<sup>39</sup> ILO, 2017. [Quick guide on sources and uses of labour statistics](#), p. 36; [wcms\\_757960.pdf \(ilo.org\)](#), p. 1; ILO, 2020a, op. cit.; ILO, 2019b. [Enhancing the Knowledge Base to Support the Promotion of Decent Work in Rural Areas](#); ILO, 2023c. [Statistics on the informal economy – Report for discussion at the 21<sup>st</sup> International Conference of Labour Statisticians](#).

<sup>40</sup> OECD, 2020. [Rural Well-Being: Geography of Opportunities](#).

**28. Promoting a just transition and greening the rural economy is vital for productivity, growth and decent work.**<sup>41</sup> Some rural economies have tapped into opportunities for green job creation in natural resource-based economic activities, including ecosystem services to mitigate and adapt to climate change, such as air and water purification, biodiversity, groundwater recharge, and greenhouse mitigation. For instance, sustainable forest management, including through reforestation, afforestation, and forest restoration activities, have the potential to contribute to a forest sector that is productive, contributes to national economies, provides decent jobs, and is environmentally friendly and helps to address the impacts of climate change (see box 5).

**Box 5 – Tripartite workshop in East Africa on promoting decent work in forestry**

The forest sector provides for the livelihoods of millions of people in the East African sub-region. Forests provide jobs, shelter, food, and a wide variety of forest products, as well as vital environmental services, including those that help to mitigate and adapt to climate change. However, decent work deficits in the sector persist, especially for those in the informal economy. The ILO organized a tripartite workshop in the East-African sub-region that aimed to identify main opportunities and challenges for promoting decent work in the forest sector. The workshop also aimed to foster the exchange experiences on promoting decent work in reforestation. The workshop was attended by tripartite representatives, as well as government ministries responsible for forestry. Workshop participants agreed on a set of building blocks for advancing decent and sustainable work in the forest sector in the sub-region. The ILO will continue to work with the tripartite constituents to explore opportunities to support the implementation of the building blocks, including through identifying opportunities for development cooperation activities.<sup>42</sup>

**29. Expanding green infrastructure in rural economies would help small-scale farmers have access to renewable energies and enhance productivity and sustainability.** These investments can also facilitate the transition to formal employment. Such investments are to be combined with skills development and support services to equip the rural communities to harness the potential of this transition to a greener economy.

**30. The blue economy is attracting much attention to promote job creation and improve productivity in the fisheries and aquaculture sectors through climate-resilient systems, but also to address decent work deficits in these sectors (see box 6).** Opportunities for blue growth encompass improved marine and freshwater fisheries systems, aquaculture, aquaponics, and other

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<sup>41</sup> ILO, 2015. [Guidelines for a Just Transition towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies for all.](#)

<sup>42</sup> ILO, 2023d. [Subregional tripartite workshop on promoting decent work in the forest sector, with a focus on reforestation.](#)

forms of combined aquaculture/agriculture production. Aquaculture and related activities offer significant potential for job creation.<sup>43</sup>

#### **Box 6 - Promoting decent work in the fisheries supply chain in Namibia**

Given the relevance and potential of Namibia's fisheries sector, ILO has provided technical support to enhance the understanding of decent work challenges and opportunities in the fisheries supply chain and promote sectoral social dialogue among policymakers, employers, and workers. Under the "Sustainable Supply Chains to Build Forward Better" project, with support from the European Union, the ILO first carried out a "[deep-dive](#)" study in the fishing sector to inform the formulation of sector-specific interventions. A [toolkit](#) was developed to better equip the ILO constituents and key stakeholders in Namibia to promote decent work in fishing and better implement and enforce the [Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 \(No. 188\)](#). In the framework of the [Strategic Compliance Planning for Labour Inspectorates](#), several tools have been adapted, such as a field guide for labour inspection, informative leaflets on employment conditions and occupational safety and health, and standardized employment contract templates. To strengthen labour inspection in the sector, there was training provided to labour inspectors as well as a first Joint Pilot Inspection in the Namibian fishing sector involving the three key regulatory agencies (the Ministry of Labour Industrial Relations and Employment Creation, the Ministry of Works and Transport, and the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources). Lastly, a standing tripartite National Commission on Decent Work in the Namibian Fisheries Sector is being established to discuss decent work priorities, find solutions to improve working conditions through social dialogue and act as the coordination mechanism required by Convention No. 188.<sup>44</sup>

**31. Accelerating the transition to formality in rural economies is key, and this requires comprehensive, innovative and integrated approaches that include the creation, preservation and formalization of enterprises and decent jobs.** Targeted actions may be foreseen to counter the relative disadvantage of women and youth in rural areas. Representative employers' and workers' organizations and, where they exist, representative organizations of those in the informal economy can assist workers and economic units in the informal economy. Cooperatives and other farmers' organizations can also provide a step towards formalization.<sup>45</sup>

**32. Promoting more sustainable and productive farm practices** will feed productivity gains throughout the agri-food system and contribute to the transition towards more environmentally friendly and inclusive agri-food systems.

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<sup>43</sup> ILO, 2021b. [Technical meeting on the future of work in aquaculture in the context of the rural economy](#).

<sup>44</sup> For more details, see: ILO, 2023e. [Sustainable Supply Chains to Build Forward Better: Project Results](#).

<sup>45</sup> ILO, 2014. [Transitioning from the Informal to the Formal Economy](#), ILC.103/V/1.

- 33. Decent jobs in the agri-food sector can be boosted through employment promotion in agri-related downstream businesses** and strengthening market access of agricultural producers.
- 34. Opportunities emerge in agro-food processing, agro-logistics, and the broad range of food distribution services.** Small and Medium Agro-Enterprises (SMAEs) play a major role in agri-food systems. SMAEs can enhance value addition and market access at the local level and help leverage the assets and expertise within rural communities. Targeted support to SMAEs may be needed to support their transition to formality and greener operations and to ensure workers' rights and access to social protection.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, access to business services is critical for the participation of SMAEs in agri-food systems. Integrated approaches for providing agricultural and agri-business services can be effective in this regard. In some contexts, agro-industrial parks or agricultural hubs are being developed to provide extension services to farmers, access to production equipment and processing facilities, as well as facilitating market access by linking local producers with rural, urban and international markets.<sup>47</sup>
- 35. Harnessing the potential of agri-food systems and rural economies for creating decent jobs for rural youth will be critical to keeping up with a growing demand for food and supporting the generational renewal in agriculture and rural areas (see box 7).** Leveraging the potential of the rural economy for youth employment requires investments in promoting their access to assets such as land, skills development, and social protection and ensuring their rights at work. It is about fostering an enabling environment for youth-led agri-enterprises and sponsoring a positive image of agricultural life. Youth with the appropriate skills and access to modern technologies can become the forerunners in greening the agri-food sector by moving towards more profitable and sustainable farming practices and bringing the benefits of technology. Young farmers can benefit from greater access to cooperatives and other rural organizations in order to achieve economies of scale and commercially position their products. Agricultural machinery rental and repair services provided by cooperatives and private companies have great potential for quality job creation and to attract young people. Moreover, as agri-businesses expand, opportunities for wage employment for youth will also increase in marketing, small-scale food processing and food retailing. An integral part of these efforts is to work for and with young people. More effective participation of rural youth in employers' and workers' organizations can enhance their involvement in rural communities and social dialogue

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<sup>46</sup> ILO, 2022d. [A Double Transition: Formalization and the Shift to Environmental Sustainability with Decent Work](#).

<sup>47</sup> Proctor, F.J., and Berdegúe, J.A., 2016. [Food Systems at the Rural-Urban Interface](#), RIMISP Working Papers No. 194, RIMISP.

processes. Special attention to young women's empowerment would contribute to addressing gender imbalances.

**Box 7 - Promoting a brighter future of work for rural youth through investments and partnerships**

In Madagascar, with the support of the ILO, the government authorities, social partners, civil society, youth, and other stakeholders involved in the rural economy developed a National Action Plan (NAP) to promote decent work in the rural economy (2017-2019). The NAP placed a strong focus on promoting opportunities for rural youth, acknowledging the significant gap between youth aspirations and existing employment opportunities in rural areas. The operationalization of NAP to promote decent work in the rural economy has advanced with support from the Government of Norway and IFAD. ILO has provided technical support for rural entrepreneurship promotion and infrastructure development through a whole-of-government approach involving different ministries (Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Technical Education and Vocational Training). The collaboration with IFAD in Madagascar is also exemplary of the progress of the partnership for the promotion of decent work in the rural economy at the national level, with particular attention to rural youth.

**36. Women's economic empowerment calls for a gender-transformative process in rural**

**economies.** As rural women face multiple and often interrelated challenges, effort is needed on many fronts, and much will depend on the country's circumstances. The quest towards rural women's empowerment and a transformative agenda for gender equality includes priority areas such as creating decent jobs for rural women, facilitating their access to entrepreneurship training, productive resources, and social protection benefits, including maternity benefits, as well as to finance and business services. Reducing their time constraints requires improvements in rural infrastructure, including water and energy, and access to new technologies. For future generations of rural women, adequate access to care facilities, services, and quality education is crucial to breaking the intergenerational cycle of gender inequality. By ensuring that the voices of rural women are heard, their needs can be better reflected at the policy level.

**37. Namibia has much potential for promoting decent job creation through rural economic diversification by moving beyond agriculture and mining into other economic sectors such as fishing and aquaculture, and tourism.**

Processes of rural diversification are primarily determined by the agroecological environment and the local economy. Therefore, policies to support rural economic diversification draw on those context-specific assets that can bring competitive and absolute advantages. For instance, by developing food clusters, synergies between agriculture and tourism can foster many opportunities for economic diversification and job creation in rural areas.



**38. In particular, the tourism sector is one of the fastest-growing sectors in many countries, including Namibia.**<sup>48</sup> Tourism contributes to job creation both direct and indirect. Experience from other countries underlies how sectoral social dialogue can facilitate processes to harness the potential of rural tourism to re-invigorate rural economies in ways that respect the environment and cultural heritage and increase the attractiveness of rural areas for the younger generations (see box 8).

**Box 8 – Boosting the tourism sector through a sectoral roundtable**

In countries such as Ecuador and Costa Rica, tourism is an economic sector in expansion, employing more than 6 per cent of the workforce. It was significantly affected by the COVID-19 crisis, with many job losses and business closures. With ILO technical assistance, a Tourism multistakeholder Roundtable (*Mesa Ejecutiva*) was established in 2021 in order to promote sectoral social dialogue for the sector’s recovery. Through the roundtable, the government and social partners and other key relevant stakeholders meet regularly to discuss the challenges of the tourism sector and the implementation of interventions to advance decent work in the sector. Members of the roundtable jointly identified solutions to concrete bottlenecks faced by the sector. As part of the process, a roadmap for action was developed as part of the process, and efforts towards its implementation would follow up. The roadmap for action constituted a key milestone for the roundtable process as it ensures ownership and continuity at the institutional level. Sectoral multistakeholder roundtables are a useful platform to promote social dialogue and foster collaboration among different stakeholders with a view to explore synergies and implement solutions for promoting decent work and enhancing productivity at the sectoral level.<sup>49</sup>

**39. If promoted in an inclusive manner, digitalization in rural areas can bring substantial opportunities to the rural economy.** For instance, technological advances can help increase agricultural productivity and profitability, and mitigate and prevent occupational hazards and casualties in agriculture. Natural resource constraints and environmental limits can be turned into an advantage by seizing the opportunities for rural development to rely on the latest and most efficient technology. Technological innovations can also be seized to promote economic diversification in rural areas. At the same time, there can be challenges where automation and artificial intelligence can replace or redefine jobs. In some cases, automation of some manual tasks at the farm level could increase the need for highly skilled manual workers. Irrigation through mechanized pumps often allows two or three more crops to be grown on the same plot of land per year, thus increasing labour demand.

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<sup>48</sup> GIZ, 2022b. [Sector Brief Tourism](#).

<sup>49</sup> ILO, 2021c. [Las Mesas Ejecutivas para la productividad y el trabajo decente: enfoque y metodología](#).

- 40. However, there is a risk of leading to a deeper digital divide.** In particular, it is important to ensure that indigenous and tribal peoples, women, youth, small-scale farmers, and migrant workers are not left behind. In that regard, the investments in rural connectivity mentioned above need to go together with social dialogue on the use of technology, and investments in skills training for rural workers on new technology.
- 41. Rural remoteness can be overcome by improving rural connectivity and technological advances, and rural economies can take on opportunities to provide distant services online.** For instance, rural smart villages base their development on their own resources and assets while also taking up opportunities through multi-service centres and information and communication technologies (ITCs) to facilitate access to business services and digital solutions for rural enterprises, including Micro-, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs), to market their products and services. Rural workers can also benefit from greater outreach of employment and social services.
- 42. Investing in a skilled rural workforce through inclusive skills development programmes and measures to enhance employability can support rural workers in view of the evolving challenges in the world of work.<sup>50</sup>** Such investments can be particularly relevant for the younger generations so that they can prosper and start productive working lives in rural areas. At the same time, many rural workers may need support as shifts underway in the transformation of the rural economies are displacing some workers in some occupations and sectors while creating new opportunities in others. In agriculture, moving from staple crops to high-value and processed products can radically change skills and job requirements, the level of returns, and the quality of employment. As rural economies diversify, job opportunities emerge in more diverse occupations and sectors. Continuous retraining and up-skilling of workers will gain relevance for rural enterprises, for them to be agile in taking up new opportunities in increasingly dynamic markets.
- 43. Promoting more equitable and effective access to skills and lifelong learning would be needed in many rural areas.** In addition to community-based training, opportunities for technical and vocational education and training (TVET) could be strengthened, building on the identification and anticipation of skills needs in rural labour markets, and investing in certification of skills relevant to the sectors (see box 9). Active labour market policies and public employment services (PES) can support workers in up-skilling and re-skilling to keep or change jobs.

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<sup>50</sup> ILO, 2021d. [Resolution Concerning Skills and Lifelong Learning adopted at the 109th ILC Session](#).

#### **Box 9 – Certifying skills of agricultural workers in the coffee supply chain**

The coffee supply chain in Colombia is the largest generator of rural jobs, including pickers, plantation administrators and extensionists. The coffee sector in Colombia provides opportunities for around 2 million people or 7.7 per cent of the total labour force. Most work is informal on a daily wage or piece-rate basis, often under verbal contracts or as contributing family workers. Other decent work deficits include long working hours, many OSH hazards, and lack of access to social protection. Informal workers in the coffee chain also lacked adequate skills development and certification recognition. ILO's technical support in Colombia has helped to advance decent work in the coffee sector. In particular, the first certification programme of labour skills and competencies was created for coffee harvesting workers in partnership with the National Training Service. A total of 1,072 coffee farmers and collectors had their skills and competencies certified according to unified technical standards.<sup>51</sup>

**44. Linking employment and rural development policies with social protection policies is critical to addressing economic insecurity, as well as pre-existing and systemic inequalities in access to social protection among rural workers and their families.** The crisis generated momentum for governments to extend efforts and progressively overcome the financial, administrative and legal barriers (among others) that hinder people's access to social protection, including in rural areas (see box 10).<sup>52</sup> With the rapid changes in the world of work and the just transition process that may lead to increasingly diverse work arrangements in rural labour markets, ensuring adequate social protection for workers in all types of employment will be essential to help rural workers navigate work-to-work transitions between wage employment and self-employment, across different enterprises and sectors of the economy or between countries.

#### **Box 10 - Innovative social insurance scheme to extend protection to rural workers**

Achieving universal social protection coverage in Ecuador hinges upon the relative importance of the rural economy in the labour market. The Government of Ecuador extended social protection to own-account agricultural workers, artisanal fishing workers and their families through the Peasants' Social Insurance (Seguro Social Campesino, SSC). The SSC provides coverage to nearly 1.1 million people (6.13 per cent of the population), of whom 378,000 were the main contributors to the system and 644,000 were their dependents. Based on the principle of solidarity, the SSC is financed by contributions of employers and workers covered by the General Scheme, the mandatory contribution from public and private insurance companies embedded in the National Social Security System, the insured member's contribution to the SSC, and a government subsidy. This financing structure reduces the barriers that hinder workers with low contributory capabilities from benefitting from social insurance. The SSC is characterized by an integral service structure with remarkable regional presence. Around the SSC, rural organizations and federations have been strengthened. The SSC in Ecuador demonstrates that, through innovations

<sup>51</sup> ILO, 2023f. [Challenges and Opportunities to Advance Decent Work in Five Countries and Supply Chains: A Synthesis Report](#).

<sup>52</sup> ILO and FAO, 2021. [Extending Social Protection to Rural Population](#); ILO, 2021e. [Extending Social Security Coverage to Workers in the Informal Economy: Lessons from International Experience](#).

in the design, implementation and financing of schemes, it is possible to extend social protection to rural workers.

**45. Appropriate attention is needed to promote and ensure rights at work.** Together with appropriate labour law coverage and enforcement mechanisms, strong labour administration and inspection contribute to implementing national legislation and ensuring workplace compliance in rural areas, particularly concerning freedom of association and collective bargaining (see box 11). Labour inspectors can play a role in raising awareness and educating rural workers, employers, and rural communities at large on their rights and obligations. For instance, the outreach and capacity of labour administration in rural areas can be improved by favouring coordination with agricultural extension services and harnessing technological advances. In particular, ensuring a safe and healthy working environment for rural workers is key in view of the range of OSH risks encountered in agriculture and other rural economic sectors. Strong capacity of national and local governments and that of social partners is central.

**Box 11 - Advancing workers' rights in Indonesia's and Malaysia's palm oil sector**

The ILO project on Advancing Workers' Rights in Indonesia's and Malaysia's Palm Oil Sector showcases the relevance of strengthening the capacity of social partners for the promotion of decent work in the sector. ILO's technical support has aimed to ensure that Indonesian unions in the palm oil supply chain effectively advocate for their members' access to fundamental workers' rights, in particular freedom of association and collective bargaining. For instance, in Indonesia, the Indonesian Palm Oil Association (GAPKI) and the Indonesian Trade Union Network for Palm Oil (JAPBUSI) signed a Joint Declaration to address decent work deficits in the sector. There has been support as well to improve compliance through strengthened capacity of enterprises to implement core labour standards and national labour laws.<sup>53</sup>

**V. Final considerations**

**46.** A major renewed effort to create decent work opportunities in rural Namibia is imperative and must be part and parcel of strategies to reduce inequalities, build resilience against future crises and to help get on course for sustainable development.

**47. Looking ahead, we can seize the momentum to trigger transformative changes and advance towards more revitalized and dynamic rural economies.** In the context of Namibia's engagement

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<sup>53</sup> ILO project [Advancing Workers' Rights in Indonesia and Malaysia's Palm Oil Sector](#).

with the Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions<sup>54</sup>, there is commitment to advance concrete actions to support decent job creation and universal social protection for just transitions, including by strengthening policies, untapped sustainable job growth potential, the expansion of social protection coverage, and key sectors of the economy where integrated policies and financing approaches would be relevant. In particular, there is much potential for inclusive and sustainable investments in the agri-food sector, fisheries, and aquaculture.

**48. There is also potential for off-farm job creation through rural diversification, including by expanding rural tourism and green jobs in renewables.** At the same time, efforts to put employment at the centre of planning and programmes, and to reverse high rates of youth unemployment, can have major impacts on the future of rural areas. Importantly, addressing the transition from informality to formality, and improving access to social protection for rural populations in the country are critical to ensure that no one is left behind.

**49. Placing decent jobs at the centre of efforts towards revitalizing rural economies and strengthening their resilience is imperative to advance social justice and tackle social and economic inequalities.** Consequently, rural areas will become more attractive places to work and live, and springboards for inclusive, sustainable and resilient development. This is key for Namibia to accelerate progress in creating decent jobs and advancing towards social justice.

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<sup>54</sup> The Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions, launched in September 2021 by the UN Secretary-General, signals the UN system's collective response to addressing the multiple challenges that threaten to erase development progress. For more information: [Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions](#).